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ABSTRACT

A historical review of theories of persuasion and its relationship to such areas as argument and propaganda indicates a number of inherent weaknesses in the definitions and taxonomies which have been proposed. Definitions and classifications have been sometimes circular in nature, have reflected the special interests of their authors, have been ambiguous and vague in category definition, and have contradicted one another. As an alternative, persuasion should be considered the single encompassing term in any process of communication which influences thought, belief, attitude, or behavior. This conceptualization includes as subcategories of persuasion such other communicative modes as argumentation, propaganda, information, entertainment, and coercion. (AA)

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"TOWARD A TAXONOMY FOR CONCEPTUALIZING PERSUASION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES"

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TOWARD A TAXONOMY FOR CONCEPTUALIZING
PERSUASION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

As long as men probe the means and possibilities of manipulating other people, whether to effect behaviorial modification, attitude change, social control, etc., the structure and meaning of persuasion can not remain static - but must rather by dynamic. The consequences of studying a dynamic process (especially from a taxonomic point of view), is very difficult if not impossible, because of nature of a taxonomy tends to make inflexible a phenonenon which is constantly being reviewed and revised in both theory and application. Moreover, if we accept the notion that persuasion or social influence is a complex, interrelated, transactive, dynamic process, then the fastidious task of developing a taxonomy for conceptualizing persuasion in the social sciences becomes overwhelming.

It is not, however, impossible or difficult to trace the development of the changing conceptualization of persuasion from the humanities to the social sciences. It is here - the carryover of "principles of persuasion" as a humanities - that the development of persuasion as a social science has been retarded. My reason for subjecting you to this historical perspective first, is because it is my hunch we will be able to discover some inherent weaknesses in definitions and taxonomies (or the lack of them) from the earlier period of time, which should help develop a more acceptable contemporary taxonomy of persuasion. Basically the purposes of this paper are twofold: (1) to briefly trace the historical development of persuasion until it

interlocks with the more contemporary development of persuasion as a social science found in Dr. Millar's paper, and (2) to suggest a taxonomy for conceptualizing persuasion in the social sciences.

I suppose the advertisement for Virginia Slim cigarettes best exemplifies this changing concept of persuasion with the words - "We've come a long way baby!" So overwhelming was Aristotle's treatise on persuasion that it retarded innovative scholarly endeavors in the area of persuasion for an unwarranted long period of time. One author has written that "it required some 2300 years for Aristotle's observation to be put to a rigorous scientific test." It was around 1950 that persuasion began to find a home in the social sciences and this was accomplished outside the field of speech communication by Hovland and his associates. But let me digress for a few minutes in order to give a historical perspective on this changing concept of persuasion to the social sciences from within the field of speech communication.

Until the mid-1960's most popular persuasion texts contained similar definitions which reflected the same notions found in Aristotle's Rhetoric. The notion advanced by Aristotle was that proof (persuasion) is a kind of demonstration that can be judged by its effect upon someone, and the end of that discourse is to affect the judge(s) or audience by "gaining their assent," by "effecting their soul," or to "persuade to a course of action or to dissuade from it."[1] The general definitions found in traditional persuasion texts - from 1952 to 1962 - usually included some variation on the standard statement of influencing the thought, attitude, opinions, feelings, conduct and/or action of the listeners.[2] Wallace Fotheringham summarizes the

general thinking of that period of time in the following paragraphs.

> Brembeck and Howell (1952) prefer to consider persuasion an attempt. For them, persuasion is 'the conscious attempt to modify thought and action by manipulating the motives of men toward predetermined ends...' Thayer (1961) sees persuasion as 'a conscious effort made by people to affect other people's behavior in a specific circumstance or at a specific time.' Similarly, Wright and Warner (1962) consider persuasion as 'an active attempt to influence people to action or belief by an overt appeal to reason or emotion.'
>
> Other authors stress the stimuli involved, the means used to influence. Minnick (1957) prefers 'persuasion is discourse, written or oral, that is designed to win belief or stimulate action by employing all of the factors that determine human behavior.' Blau and Scott (1962) note that 'in persuasion, one person lets the arguments of another person influence his decisions or actions...'3

If bibliographies accuragely reflect what was happening during the fifties and sixties in the area of persuasion, from an attitude and behavioral change point of view, then it is readily visible why social scientists in other disciplines, attending speech communication conventions, found it necessary to set their watches and minds back at least twenty-five years. During that time we were furthering our claim on provincialism by advancing definitions and taxonomies that at best defied consistency. For example, many authorities espoused the notion that persuasion was a single type of oral discourse, that it did not include communicative messages which were informative, entertaining or stimulating. These claims were distinctly inconsistent with the "stock" definitions of persuasion previously cited. David K. Berlo neatly summarizes the problem just alluded to.

> The inform - persuade - entertain distinction has led to confusion...There has been a tendency to interpret these purposes as exclusive: one is not

> giving information when he is entertaining, one is not entertaining when he is persuading, and so on... For example, it is popular today to distinguish between education (inform), propaganda (persuade), and entertainment (entertain).[4]

Equally as disturbing was the declaration that persuasion and argumentation were separate categories of communication that were mutually exclusive of each other. A survey of the literature reveals not only a lack of agreement among the various authors as to what the relationship was between argumentation and persuasion, but more significantly implies the cause for this disagreement was a tendency by the authors surveyed to define terms according to their interests.[5] The three major points of view revealed in this survey were, (1) that persuasion is a technique or method which can be employed in the larger process of argumentation, (2) that argument is one technique or method which can be used in the more inclusive process of persuasion, and (3) that argumentation and persuasion are two different forms of discourse - argument utilizing sound reasoning toward the attainment of conviction, and persuasion utilizing judgment, emotion, etc., toward the influence of action.

Another confusion surrounding the historical development and study of persuasion was the aversion of speech communication theorists to include propaganda and coercion within the scope of their conceptualization. The result of this exclusion led others outside the speech communication discipline to conclude that persuasion was a limited counterpart of the more encompassing term propaganda.

There were also unlimited definitions which inadvertently equated propaganda with persuasion. An examination of twenty-six different

definitions of propaganda all agreed that propaganda was the "art of influencing, manipulating, controlling, promoting, changing, inducing, or securing the acceptance of opinions, attitudes, action, or behavior."[6] Thus, the meaning of both persuasion and propaganda was indistinct because the definitions of both were equivocal. Jacques Ellul, in his book, Propaganda, objected to this duplication and suggested that we immediately rid ourselves of any simplistic definitions concerning propaganda. He cites the definition formulated by Marbury B. Ogle as his example.

> 'Propaganda is any effort to change opinions or attitudes...The propagandist is anyone who communicates his ideas with the intent of influencing his listener.' Such a definition would include the teacher, the priest, indeed any person conversing with another on any topic. Such a broad definition clearly does not help us to understand the specific character of propaganda.[7]

Harold D. Lasswell also advocated limiting the meaning of propaganda because "it serves no useful purpose to conceive of propaganda so broadly that it becomes a synonym for every form of communication..."[8]

It would be counterproductive to continue with the endless list of propaganda definitions,[9] because even those who have attempted a definition generally agree that a satisfactory definition of the concept has not yet been achieved, and that "the frontier between it and neighboring fields of activity are for the most part blurred..."[10]

The blurring process was intensified when the concept of coercion was introduced to either propaganda or persuasion theorists. They patently denied it belonged in either area of study. Coercion as a form or persuasion has generally not been developed in depth, and has mainly been ignored in textbooks and professional journals as a means

of persuasion in social control or social influence. Lindley Fraser states that "propaganda may be defined as the activity, or the art, of inducing others to behave in a way in which they would not behave in its absence.[11] However, he continues that "the behavior propaganda induces...does not include attempts to influence by means of force or compulsion...Thus, the central element in propagandist inducements is that they depend on 'communication' rather than concrete penalties or rewards."[12] Does this limitation mean that the appearance of helmeted policemen, with tear gas and riot guns does not communicate something to a group of demonstrators? Does it mean the protester's behavior was not influenced even if force was not used?

Fraser further tells us

> ...there is an extensive border area which goes by the name of 'moral compulsion' - inducing people to do things utterly contrary to what they want to do by bullying, by threats, by social pressure, by mere tedious repetition. Sometimes these methods would be naturally described as propaganda, sometimes not; but is is difficult to draw an exact line.[13]

Austin J. Freely compounds any effort to distinguish this boundary when he defines coercion "as the use or threat of force."[14] Take the example of John F. Kennedy and his "Blockade Speech," in which he threatened armed retaliation by the United States if Russian missiles were brought into Cuba? The question is, should verbal threats of force, used to influence behavior, be classified as compulsion or coercion except in the cases where the threat is actually carried out? In essence, the realization of genuine intent cannot

be determined until after the fact, and depending upon the receiver's response, the sincerity of the threat may never be known. Confusing the issue even more is what classification should be used if the person or group being influenced, believes the threat is genuine, but in fact it isn't. I suppose the ultimate question I would pose from these historical definitions is this: Are not all the concepts considered thus far a means of social influence or persuasion when contextually considered?

This cursory analysis of definitions and classifications has revealed that the usage of terms basic to speech communication and other related disciplines had no unity of meaning; were circular in nature; promoted misunderstanding caused by special interest slanting, semantical ambiguity and equivocation, and vagueness of category; and in some cases, were simply contradictory. Persuasion theorists during this period of time rejected vital components of a comprehensive paradigm. These rejections were partially based on ethical considerations and extremely restrictive points of view.

Throughout the sixties the discipline of speech communication edged its way into the social science arena. A milestone publication by Berlo (1960) emphasized some important dimensions of communication which greatly affected our conceptualization of persuasion. Paramount among those dimensions was (1) "that all use of language has a persuasive dimension, that one cannot communicate at all without some attempt to persuade, in one way or another," (2) "from a behaviorist's point of view, it is more useful to define purpose as the goal of a creator or receiver of a message, rather than as

the property of the message itself," and (3) that communication is a dynamic process.[15] This means communication (and consequently persuasion)" ...does not have a beginning, an end, a fixed sequence of events. It is not static, at rest. It is moving. The ingredients within a process interact; each affects all of the others."[16] Berlo also identified a significant factor not considered by previous persuasion theorists. That factor was that "the concept of dynamic also implies that factors that we may overlook in any single listing of the ingredients also determine what is produced."[17]

With the behaviorist influence, there was a noticeable shift in the conceptual treatment of persuasion in the later sixties and early seventies. Despite these shifts some of the dogma transcending from earlier theorists was still visible. For example, many of the definitions now included such limitations as "conscious intent" on the part of the persuader, implied a linear cause-effect process, and suggested that the effect of persuasion was voluntary. Erwin Bettinghaus declares that "it is no longer enough to look at persuasion as a one-way street, with a source actively communicating, and a receiver passively receiving," but rather that sources and receivers "are trying to persuade each other."[18] On the opposite page, he defines persuasion as "a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs, or the behavior of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message."[19] Either this is contradictory or the definition is highly inadequate.

After reviewing a sampling of conceptual views held by contemporary persuasion theorists, Miller and Burgoon readily accept the "bias that

the term 'persuasion' should be reserved for situations involving conscious intent on the part of one party (the persuader) to influence another (the persuadee)."[20] In the same paragraph they admit that "limiting persuasion to situations involving conscious attempts at influence creates certain problems; in particular, it raises the questions of how one determines whether intent is present in a particular situation."[21] Not only is it sometimes impossible to determine if intent is conscious, it is frequently impossible to determine the specific intent (if one is attempting to deal with effect relationships), and finally it is possible that the "conscious" intent differs greatly with "subconscious" intent. What label will be placed on the influence process involved in "those few, unusual situations" that these authors were "willing to accept?" And if they do accept the unusual situations, why not eliminate the limitation from the definition?

Another case of definitional weakness is a restriction of "voluntary change." Kenneth Andersen defines persuasion "as a process of interpersonal communication in which the communicator seeks through the use of symbolic agencies to affect the cognitions of the receiver and thus effect a voluntary change in attitude and/or action desired by the communicator."[22] Again the question is raised as to what the influential process would be called that effected an involuntary change in attitude and/or action, or a voluntary change that was not desired by the communicator? Andersen, in part, discusses models and at the same time indicts the linear implications within his own definition. His position is that "persuasion is dynamic,

interrelated; the model is static and linear. In persuasion the persuader of one moment becomes the persuadee of the next..."[23] According to Wenburg and Wilmont, even this qualification of the definition is not accurate. They claim that all persons engaged in persuasive communication "are engaged in sending (encoding) and receiving (decoding) messages simultaneously. Each person is constantly sharing in the encoding and decoding process, and each person is affecting the other."[24] This process is transactional rather than the back and forth linear exchange.

Unfortunately, some of the most recent texts in persuasion theory still insist that there is a clear distinction between persuasion, discussion, argumentation, coercion and submission.[25] Charles Larson states:

> Persuasion advises action or change. Discussion searches for courses of action or change. Coercion and submission demand or force action or comply with imperative courses of action. And argumentation attempts to demonstrate the relationship between evidence, information, and courses of action - not for the sake of achieving the action but more for the demonstration of proof itself.[26]

When we view the definition of persuasion by this same author, it is apparent that any and all of the components mentioned above would qualify as a part of his persuasion matrix. He defines persuasion as

> ...a process whereby decision options are intentionally limited or extended through the interaction of messages, sources, and receivers, and through which attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or behaviors are changed by a cognitive restructuring of one's image of the world or of his frame of reference.[27]

In attempting to arrive at a more consistent and acceptable taxonomy of persuasion, this discussion has avoided the psychological

theories of persuasion[28] since they are included in the paper to be presented by Dr. Frank Millar. It is disappointing to know, however, that interdisciplinary scientific investigation was not pursued until the mid-sixties, especially since Heider's balance theory on attitudes was developed as early as 1946.

The distinction of scientific investigation from ideal theory is important when discussing the conceptualization of persuasion as a social science. Frequently, the biases of theorists such as those discussed in this paper, inhibit the research of the social scientist. There must be a clear distinction between the ideals of persuasion which we teach and uphold, as opposed to the realities of persuasion which is exercised in the actual social setting. As ideal theorists we must advance "ethical" means of persuasion, but as social scientists we cannot refuse to recognize and study the "unethical" means. In like manner the definition of persuasion advanced by the social scientist cannot deny those categories or counterparts of persuasion that seem undesirable to the ideal theorist. The social scientist must seek to devise accurate measurements for all means of persuasion found in society, not just a methodology which is applicable for the "honorable and just" type of persuasion we often create in a sterile setting. Recognizing and investigating all types of persuasion does not mean we accept or support it, but rather quite the opposite. By scientific research we can better counteract the persuasion which is offensive or unacceptable in our society.

The same distinction (as between ideal theory and scientific investigation) must be exercised in any definition or taxonomy which

is applicable to social scientists interested in the study of persuasion. From my perspective we must open up the possibilities for investigation rather than restrict them. There must be a greater emphasis placed upon the totality of the persuasion process, and the complex interrelationship of the multiple components within that process. As an example, researchers in persuasion cannot afford to declare that they will not investigate the verbal or nonverbal threat of force when it is clearly used to influence attitude change and social behavior in our contemporary society. Rather than excluding the study because it is coercion, we must inversely include it as a category of persuasion. Karlins and Abelson state:

> As research in persuasion continues it becomes increasingly evident that simple 'principles of persuasion' are the exception rather than the rule. We are beginning to appreciate the complexity of the persuasion process and realize that whether or not a person is persuaded often depends on a multiplicity of interacting factors (some still not known)...Many investigations in the last decade have added 'modifiers' to old persuasion principles.[29]

Social scientists who are receptive to an extended conceptualization of persuasion will also participate in the development of a more precise and "effective science of behavior control." This exacting science will in turn "force modification of existing 'principles of persuasion' by suggesting additional factors that influence behavior change."[30]

The knowledge that no definition or taxonomy can be formulated that will be fully satisfactory should not suppress efforts toward that goal. Obviously, if the data collected is not complete or the methodology perfected in this emerging "science of persuasion," then the

interacting factors which are not yet known cannot be included. The one necessary factor in formulation seems to be flexibility. The apparent pitfall visible in the foregoing definitional survey is pointed out in the following statement.

> Persuasion theorists see the process of persuasion as involving much flexibility, the interaction of many variables. However, as these theorists proceed to give advice to the communicator or as others take over the theory, the tendency is to treat the formula as rigid and prescriptive with universal laws rather than flexible and descriptive with qualified generalizations.[31]

With a focus on flexibility I would define persuasion to be the single encompassing term in any process of communication which influences thought, beliefs, attitudes, and/or behavior. It is dynamic in nature; a relationship phenomenon; can be either interpersonal or intrapersonal; verbal or nonverbal; vocal or nonvocal; intended or unintended; ethical or unethical; conscious or unconscious; have negative or positive results; is context bound; can be transmitted by interaction or transaction; and the recipient can be influenced either knowingly or unknowingly, with the response being either overt or covert.

This conceptualization of persuasion should include all the various elements or subcategories that are at the disposal of man communicating in his social setting. Among the elements that should be included in this taxonomy are emotive communication, argumentation, propaganda, deliberation, information, coercion, entertainment, hypnosis, brainwashing and subliminal communication

The theory grid is wide open, and if social scientists are genuinely concerned with the awesome task of exploring the influences that can control human behavior and ultimately alter the destiny of societies, so must the boundaries of their investigation remain open. It will be the openness of boundaries and the willingness to remain flexible that will ultimately result in a greater understanding of the science of persuasion or social influence.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cooper, Lane (Trans.), The Rhetoric of Aristotle, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1932), passim.

2. For example see Robert T. Oliver, The Psychology of Persuasive Speech (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1957), p. 387.

3. Fotheringham, Wallace C., Perspectives on Persuasion (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966), p. 5.

4. Berlo, David K., The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 9.

5. For examples see Austin J. Freeley, Argumentation and Debate (San Francisco: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1961), p. 7 and Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1963), pp. 18-19.

6. Martin, L. John, International Propaganda (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 10.

7. Ellul, Jacques, Propaganda (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. xi.

8. Lasswell, Harold D., "A Definition of 'Propaganda,'" from Reo M. Chistenson and Robert O. McWilliams (eds.), Communication and the Mass Media (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, Inc., 1962), p. 321.

9. Over fifty definitions were available in two studies alone.

10. Fraser, Lindley, Propaganda (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 13-14.

11. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

12. Ibid., p. 17.

13. Ibid., p. 2.

14. Freeley, Argumentation and Debate, p. 8.

15. Berlo, The Process of Communication, Chapt. 1.

16. Ibid., p. 24.

17. Ibid., p. 27.

18. Bettinghaus, Erwin P., Persuasive Communication, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 11.

19. Ibid., p. 10.

20. Miller, Gerald R. and Michael Burgoon, New Techniques of Persuasion (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 3.

21. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

22. Andersen, Kenneth E., Persuasion: Theory and Practice (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971), p. 23.

23. Ibid.

24. Wenburg, John R. and William W. Wilmont, The Personal Communication Process (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 5.

25. Larson, Charles U., Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1973), chapter 1.

26. Ibid., p. 6.

27. Ibid., p. 10.

28. These theoretical developments would principally include Heider's balance theory, Osgood and Tanenbaum's congruity hypothesis, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, Brown's differentiation principle, Rosenberg's affective-cognitive consistency, Fishbein's attitude-belief distinction, Katz's functional approach to attitudes, Kelman's processes of social influence, and others. A comprehensive bibliography of the literature relating to behavioral and attitude change has been included as a supplement to this paper.

29. Karlins, Marvin and Abelson, Herbert I., Persuasion, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1970), p. 3.

30. Ibid.

31. Andersen, Persuasion: Theory and Practice, p. 17.

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